

# Skills to pay the bills: a review of the Skills for Jobs White Paper, including considerations for supporting the adult education agenda

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**Abstract** The Skills for Jobs White Paper and Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) have been anticipating changes in UK policy. Participation in adult education and work-based opportunities has been in decline for over 15 years, but without a clear information, advice and guidance (IAG) strategy and framework, there is reasonable doubt if the intended outcomes will be met. Using a narrative literature review relating to IAG, mature students and lifelong learning, this article finds the key to the success in supporting the adult education agenda involves collaboration. This should involve regional-level partnerships to map out provision with education providers, employers and local government, ensuring representation of the group through targeted initiatives, personal support and guidance.

**Key words** adult education; mature students; UK educational policy; lifelong learning; IAG; adult representation in education

## Background

In January 2021, the Department of Education published the Skills for Jobs White Paper (Department of Education, 2021a). This long-awaited piece of legislation<sup>i</sup> promised to provide a range of skills-based provision during an individual's working life through vocational or technical education, giving employers a significant role in designing courses (Department of Education, 2021a: p. 6). The policy states that the further education (FE) and skills sectors have been overlooked in comparison to higher education institutions (HEIs) and the ongoing challenges with funding and provision have seen FE providers suffer with decreasing student numbers (Hubble, Bolton and Powell, 2021).

A combination of factors motivated the Skills for Jobs White Paper, including the post-pandemic economic recovery and the UK's withdrawal from the EU (Department of Education, 2021a; Department of Education, 2021b). A wide range of discussions

around compulsory, non-compulsory and lifelong learning objectives are outlined through a range of proposals, including:

- Lifetime skills guarantee for all UK citizens.
- Involving employers in course design to assist with meeting local demand through partnership; funding colleges to work more collaboratively with the Chambers of Commerce and local businesses to shape provision.
- Reforming post-18 education and associated funding mechanisms, including the introduction of a Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) in February 2023 for roll-out in 2025.
- Providing colleges with £1.3 billion in capital funding to help meet demand.<sup>ii</sup>

Following the introduction of the Skills for Jobs White Paper there have been numerous consultations held to address the strategy through various schemes. The National Skills Fund (Department of Education, 2022b) makes up part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee (Department of Education, 2021b) by providing free courses for jobs; helping individuals aged 19 and over to retrain or upskill by completing a Level 3 course (if one has not previously been completed). Courses available cover a range of sectors that currently reflect a skills gap, including Accounting, Engineering and Health and Social Care (HM Government, 2023a). These courses have been included in the 'Skills for Life' campaign launched by the government, to adult support learners advancing into new careers. Pathways detailed in the campaign include:

- 'Skills Bootcamps,' offering free, 16-week courses to build 'sector-specific' skills to advance individuals into employment and improve the skills of those already in work (Department of Education, 2021b; HM Government, 2023b); and
- 'Multiply,' providing adults outside of compulsory education the opportunity to improve numeracy skills (Department of Education, 2022; HM Government, 2023c). This latter-mentioned scheme was set up to build confidence in individuals' maths skills through a variety of initiatives and courses, from drop-in sessions to short-term intensive courses and full-length qualifications (HM Government, 2023a; HM Government, 2023c).

Response to the Skills for Jobs White Paper have been cautiously welcomed throughout the FE sector, but there is a

clear call for additional funding and training, including support with the delivery of information, advice and guidance (IAG) (FE News, 2021). The Career’s Development Institute (CDI) is a professional body for career development in the UK, recognised by the government in providing careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) within set standards of practice. Hooley responded to the White Paper on behalf of the CDI in 2021, highlighting its main concerns with the paper as making few major announcements, with exception to the LLE and subsequent post-18 qualification review. Notably, Hooley (2021) remarks that the approach to careers guidance is a continuation of existing policy, lacking ambition and not providing a lifelong careers strategy, leaving ‘key issues vague or unresolved’ (p. 2).

Hooley’s response to the Skills for Jobs White Paper focuses on a section titled ‘clear and trusted information, advice and guidance for careers and education choices,’ which falls under the flexible skills lifetime guarantee. This is the only explicitly named section within the Skills for Jobs White Paper which outlines the intentions to support changes to IAG policy (Department of Education, 2021a). Hooley (2021) further references the 2019 Conservative manifesto (The Conservative Party, 2019) and Gavin Williamson’s FE speech with the Social Market Foundation (HM Government, 2020), which provided basic insight into intentions relating to the Skills for Jobs White Paper’s impact on existing IAG systems. Table 1, below, provides an overview to summarise the CDI’s response to the Skills for Jobs White Paper, with specific reference to IAG-related proposals and ambitions.

<p><b>Table 1:</b> Summary of CDI response to Skills for Jobs White Paper</p> <p><b>Key proposals outlined:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Placing employers at central stage to increase availability of skills and aligning education and training to the needs of businesses.</li> <li>- Supporting mechanisms to help individuals ‘level up’ and improve access to education and training.</li> <li>- Help to rebalance the education system away from HE and toward vocational and technical education.</li> </ul> <p><b>Initiatives in place to support aims:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee to provide individual entitlements to funding (Lifelong Learning</li> </ul>
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<p>Entitlement) to provide more flexibility in how education is funded between Levels 4 to 6.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Aligning education and training with employers needs through the creation of local skills improvement plans. These plans aim to enable employers to set the focus to their own standards.</li><li>- Providing strategic development funds for some colleges to allow reshaping of provision to meet employer needs, while funding other colleges to establish 'business centres' to collaborate with employers more closely.</li></ul>
<p><b>Building on existing initiatives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Implementation of new funding for existing initiatives including the apprenticeship system, T-levels, higher technical qualifications, and Institutes of Technology (as part of the HTQ reform).</li><li>- Additional measures aim to support enhancement standards, support teacher recruitment, reform teacher education and professional development, and improve governance in colleges.</li></ul>
<p><b>Short term initiatives highlighted:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Provision of £8 million for digital skills training.</li><li>- Consultation of stakeholders to improve and update systems and funding arrangements and publish more data.</li></ul>
<p><b>Concerns raised relating to IAG:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Urges there is a need for a new plan for IAG delivery following the expiration of the 2017 careers strategy (Department of Education, 2017); there is no specific guidance contained within the Skills for Jobs White Paper, and no period to confirm when this will be planned and made available. The CDI states that 'careers' is a broader policy area and the risk of purely focusing on technical and vocational education ignores the broader policy links pertinent to England's wider career guidance system.</li><li>- The CDI finds that the White Paper lacks discussion around 'personal advice,' claiming this to be a 'huge oversight.' Schools and colleges have been struggling to meet demand for delivering personal guidance with tighter budgets and competing priorities. Those outside of formal education rely on the website of the National Careers Service (NCS), which is funded to target specific groups of people at risk of unemployment. There is an ongoing campaign to create a career guidance guarantee to develop a much clearer and more ambitious approach to personal guidance.</li></ul>

- The CDI feels that greater ambition is needed to make a success of the intended policy changes. Despite the 2017 changes to careers guidance (Department of Education, 2017) making some headway in compulsory education, there is recognition that strategies for those outside of compulsory education have received less attention.

*Source:* Summary of CDI's key points in response to the Skills for Jobs White Paper (Hooley, 2021)

The potential absence of IAG strategy in this policy has created a concern that this new post-18 reform and associated funding mechanisms will not be any clearer for adult learners, especially with the ambition to implement the LLE in 2025 (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020; WonkHE, 2023a). Coulson (2021) raises points around the practicalities of funding for employers in support of upskilling their existing workforce due to funding being ringfenced to apprenticeships; he further extends that work-based opportunities may also be inequitable for some due to external commitments and impact on flexible working patterns. Ahead of the announcement of the LLE in March 2023, the Department of Education presented a consultation response, addressing the questions and concerns that had been raised from the sector. This document also included a response on HTQ modularity, which was consulted on through the HE reforms process<sup>iii</sup>. Overall, there was a clear understanding that the ethos of the LLE would be positive to the UK public; however, there were questions raised around ambition, scope and providing quality provision and flexibility (Department of Education, 2023d).

Coincidentally, a consultation into the Office for Students (OfS) approach to regulating equality of opportunity has been completed, with their guidance updated in line with the outcomes (OfS, 2022). An Equality of Risk Register (EORR) was published in March 2023 in preparation for the next round of Access and Participation Plans (APP) due in 2025–26. The EORR was created to support the risks an HEI identifies within its APP as relevant within its regional context (OfS, 2023a). Education providers who charge a fee of more than £6,000 per year have a regulatory obligation to the OfS to complete an APP, ensuring representation of groups who may not traditionally progress into HE (OfS, 2023a; Baldwin and Raven, 2022). Many HEIs have specific targets within their APPs to encourage adults into higher

education (HE), with FE providers often spending more of their allocated funding on adult education<sup>iv</sup> (Baldwin and Raven, 2022). Dearing (Education England, 1997) set out the FE agenda for providing HE opportunities through a 'vocational ladder' approach<sup>v</sup>, which in turn has caused a blurring of boundaries through the delivery of programmes and progression routes for students (Scott, 2010; Roberts, 2011).

FE and HE have associated interests in recruiting adult students, increasing the range of opportunities for individuals to navigate based on prior attainment and delivery mode; however, the rhetoric linking to the success of associated policies relating to skills and the labour market seems cyclical (Bynner, 2017). As Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) argue, since the introduction of the Widening Participation (WP) agenda set out by Dearing in the late 1990s, the decline in participation through adult education is linked to the decline in funding, which was instead focused on younger students. The ambitions of the Skills for Life White Paper would potentially redistribute funding back into FE to support delivery of HTQs. However, on top of their already busy workloads, FE providers will still need to submit an APP to the OfS to fund HE centres and delivery of programmes to the same level of detail as HEIs (Baldwin and Raven, 2022).

This article will discuss the collocation in FE providers and HEIs attempting to recruit mature students<sup>vi</sup> who may either be attracted to or confused by the new range of vocational options available (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). The LLE promises to provide courses and simpler funding options for individuals to upskill and retrain flexibly throughout their lifetime, but again, without an accompanying IAG strategy to support the individuals in the first place, it is questionable how they will be able to navigate the changing landscape. It should also be considered whether the Skills for Jobs White Paper and introduction to the LLE will supersede the way people look for information and make informed decisions about their educational pathways.

## Methodology

This article has used a narrative literature review approach (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Maier, 2013) to explore themes relating to technical and vocational routes into higher education,

adult IAG, lifelong learning and skills education for mature students. Alongside a review of literature in the academic domain, a further review of the Skills for Jobs White Paper and associated strands relating to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement were included. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion relating to adult education policy and includes recommendations relating to pragmatic actions HE providers can take to support the lifelong learning agenda for those seeking tertiary-level study opportunities. This analysis has been completed using a constructivist epistemological perspective which, according to Bryman (2016), not only explores social phenomena, but the connections and their constant state of revision. Constructivism also reflects the positionality of the researcher, who is intrinsically connected to WP strategies and operational interventions affecting mature students longitudinally.

*Degrees of participation* explores plans to provide Level 4 and 5 provision and change the UK's funding system, supporting individuals to retrain flexibly throughout their lifetimes. We will discuss the rates in which adults are participating in HE, and whether the types of skill that adults should possess to further themselves could help or hinder progression. In this section, we will also look at HEI involvement and support for FE providers in delivering the intended legislative changes. *Defining flexibility* reviews the barriers to education that adult learners often face and how the policy changes aim to support them. We will also explore elements of the Skills for Jobs White Papers' ambition to provide accessible education and whether taking a vocational ladder approach is feasible, particularly for those most in need. *Catering to an adult audience* looks at challenges those outside of compulsory education encounter when trying to map out pathways and access IAG. In this section we will also review some of the factors causing students to withdraw from studies, discussing whether the continuation of personal guidance is required to aid progression. Finally, we move on to *Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration: recommendations for a consistent approach*, which highlights examples of existing practices to support the lifelong learning agenda and provide further consideration in wider discussions. The recommendations outlined in this last section reflect the intentions of the Skills for Jobs

White Paper and subsequent LLE while considering where previous policy may not have been as successful as hoped.

## Degrees of participation

The declining numbers of adults participating in tertiary-level education and the challenges faced by this group are well documented (MillionPlus, 2018; Twigg-Flesner, 2018; OfS, 2021). Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) indicate that not only has participation in HE declined, but formal workplace training has also regressed in the last 15 years. Furthermore, those who engage with training opportunities are typically more socially affluent, meaning that 'those who may benefit most from education and training – the low-skilled, low-income, unemployed, and vulnerable – receive less of it' (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020: p. 4). Reactions to the Skills for Life White Paper and LLE have been cautiously optimistic. The Chartered Institution for Further Education<sup>vii</sup> (CIFE, 2021) notes that despite several frustrations from budgetary U-turns and previous plans not making it through inception, 'this one [White Paper] feels different' (CIFE, 2021).

The introduction of HTQs promises more funding and an emphasis on employer support in line with the wider Technical Education Reform the Department of Education published in July 2020. This aims to benefit both employers and learners by filling gaps in the labour market and support economic growth (Department of Education, 2020). A variety of new and existing HTQs are detailed on the National Careers Service<sup>viii</sup> (NCS, 2023a) and University and College Admissions Service<sup>ix</sup> (UCAS, 2023a) websites, with a call to more providers to offer provision through a range of sectors (Department of Education, 2023a). This aims to add more Level 4 and 5 provision for those seeking tertiary-level education, linking up funding mechanisms with Student Finance England (SFE) until the introduction of the LLE in 2025 (Hooley, 2021). The LLE vows to provide more modular access to education and training through flexible funding, providing up to £37,000 worth of educational investment throughout an individual's lifetime (Department of Education, 2023c). Individuals could decide to initially train to Level 4 and then seek top-up courses or training to full degree level at a later stage if they so choose with the LLE (either through employment or university). With the Equivalent Level Qualifications (ELQs) being scrapped



with the introduction of the LLE, those who may have been restricted by previous rules related to claiming student finance will now be able to explore options in line with the suggested policy (MillionPlus, 2018; WonkHE, 2023a).

Hargreaves (1997) discusses the fundamentals of lifelong learning, conveying the importance of embedding skills required to navigate future lifelong learning opportunities following completion of compulsory education. Hargreaves adds that UK IAG systems aim to support young people with work and career guidance in the interest of supporting progression routes out of school; this extends to also develop the 'skills of self-diagnosis and self-management that are of general value in life' (p. 37). IAG is currently delivered through schools and colleges using the Gatsby Benchmarks (Holman, 2014; Department of Education, 2017; Careers and Enterprise Company, 2023), which includes engagement with labour market knowledge as well as encounters with FE and HE. Scott (2010) argues that navigating pathways is not as clear cut as one would expect; FE and HE have increasingly blurred boundaries in terms of supporting academic and vocational routes into education and employment, providing more rungs on the ladder to provide flexibility in access routes, delivery modes and options. This point, related to saturation of educational opportunities, echoes Hargreaves (1997), who goes on to say that the National Qualifications Framework could be simpler but there is a danger of rationalising 'vocational' to imply 'non-academic' and potentially stunting future HE opportunities.

The Education and Skills Act commenced in 2008, which required individuals aged between 16–18 to stay in compulsory education, employment or training post completion of secondary schooling (HM Government, 2008). Roberts (2011) contends the lack of swift transition between education and work has declined since the 1970s, and the extension of individuals' time in education is partly to blame. Roberts (2011) further states the problem is that students often find themselves in a 'limbo' of sorts; those taking a vocational route report struggling to find a 'bridge' between academia and employment, remarking 'the succession of training schemes is truly bewildering' (p. 205). Reframing this in the context of adult learners, Little and Connor (2005) found that there was no clear or simple vocational ladder, and that mapping out routes is complex, especially for adults.

Notably, in a report exploring systems that work for mature students, MillionPlus (2018) found there is a clear correlation between adults with a portfolio of vocational pre-entry qualifications entering into HE within the past decade, with far fewer choosing 'other' HE opportunities below a Level 6 (such as Higher National Diplomas or foundation degrees). MillionPlus (2018) articulates that this decline in Level 4 and 5 pathways has contributed to the wider decline in participation seen from this group in more recent years (p. 21).

There remains little strategy detailed in the Skills for Jobs White Paper aimed at adults outside of the NCS website (Department of Education, 2017) which could perpetuate the idea that new opportunities will fail to attract adults from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). Navigating these opportunities assumes individuals will hold the necessary skillsets to do so independently and without guidance (Hargreaves, 1997). In addition, the Augar Review stated that 45% of adult FE funding cut between 2009/10 and 2017/18 (Department of Education, 2019) has contributed to a decline in mature students. To ensure successful implementation of the Skills for Jobs White Paper, there needs to be adequate provision within FE to support the progression of adults as much as young people (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). As Hargreaves (1997) asserts, providing foundational skills and knowledge to build from will support the transition between educational and work-based opportunities and fulfil legislative intentions.

For FE providers already providing Level 4 and 5 HTQs on top of work-based training in partnership with local employers, the transition to the LLE may be smoother than for HEIs. WonkHE (2023a) notes that the LLE will have clear implications to course design, quality assurance and student services for the HE sector should they choose to modularise their course offering. A list of already approved HTQ providers is available on the Institute of Apprenticeship and Technical Education<sup>x</sup> (IfATE) website (2023a), which so far lists few HEIs offering provision outside of traditional degrees. This is unsurprising given the Skills for Jobs White Paper exists to even the playing field for FE; however, in some regions, HEI intervention may be required to meet sector needs (Peck, 2023).

Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones (2020) discuss the importance of collaboration between FE and HE in providing IAG through the WP agenda. Intrinsically, FE providers are successful in catering to their local communities, with their students coming from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Raven, 2021). HEIs also have an invested interest in attracting students from WP demographics to HE, not only to fulfil their APP objectives through outreach, but to support recruitment targets. Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones (2020) suggest that competitiveness is a threat to the advancement of access agendas and that holistic support has more benefits to collaborative outreach programmes.

Drawing the discussion back to adult learners, the OfS reported that only 27 HEIs provided specific APP commitments to mature students in the last round of submissions covering 2020–21 to 2024–25 (OfS, 2021); perceivably, HEIs may not have HTQs and modular provision on their radar. It will be interesting to see whether HEIs contemplate HTQs and modularity in course design for the advancement of adult education and any mature student intake targets identified in future APPs. Peck (2023) challenges scepticism from HEIs in his Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) guest blog, advocating the suggested changes in policy. He argues that demand for modular courses will be higher than expected, despite the initial pilot seeing an underwhelmingly small number of participants (WonkHE, 2023b) and urges HEIs to support flexible provision. However, Scott (2010) talks about the arguments between FE and HE delivery styles, funding styles and capacity; FE providers carry such a breadth of specialties, including delivery of HE and careers guidance for adults.

FE providers can also be responsible for completing an APP for the OfS as well as fulfilling other Department of Education strategies, which come with a wealth of administration, skills and research (CIFE, 2021). Baldwin and Raven (2022) reviewed APPs submitted in 2020–21 to look comparatively at various HE and FE providers that are responsible for submitting, to highlight crossover in agendas. They recommended in their findings that FE providers should have a streamlined approach to the APP on the proviso of their breadth of delivery in line with changing policy. With the introduction of more technical routes and the potential for further impact on FE providers, this recommendation feels

more significant than ever. The potential for collaboration between FE and HE providers, where shared APP interests exist for adult education interventions, could be intrinsic to supporting regional social mobility in line with government policy agendas (Centenary Commission, 2019). This approach would support wider aims outlined in the Skills for Jobs White Paper by providing partnerships to support adult progression to make it a truly lifelong approach (Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones, 2022).

## Defining flexibility

A systematic review in the introduction to Multiply (Department of Education, 2023b) notes that a moderate proportion of adults (around 17 million people) in the UK had literacy and numeracy below a Level 2 qualification. There is a direct correlation between those who are outside employment and prior attainment (Learning and Work Institute, 2019), with the Multiply report finding that those who may benefit most from upskilling are likelier to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have less satisfaction with life (Department of Education, 2023b). As detailed earlier, Multiply (HM Government, 2023c) is one of the interventions used to encourage individuals to improve their numeracy skills through employment or independently, in a comparable way to skills bootcamps (HM Government, 2023b). These interventions aim to link up those outside of work with employers to provide accelerated training into sectors with skills shortages while also being able to claim Universal Credit (Department of Education, 2022a). However, notably, motivations for learning and the barriers preventing others from doing so link back to flexibility. MillionPlus (2018) observes that the decline in part-time learning opportunities has contributed to declining numbers in education, finding that 70% of their research respondents are engaging in some form of work while studying; their findings highlight that this is through necessity over choice.

With fewer part-time study options available, the need for part-time options, and courses with clear expectations outlined pre-arrival, are vital to creating the flexibility required (Butcher, 2017; Baldwin, Raven, and Weber-Jones, 2022). Those lacking access to key services such as childcare, transport or technology will be further disadvantaged, as well as potentially needing confidence to pursue education (Learning and Work Institute,

2019). Consequentially, Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) state that despite recognising the situational barriers adults encounter, the most noted barriers are dispositional, which relate to the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of individuals who could be participating in adult education. Lucas and Venckute (2020) discuss the role of creativity which is acknowledged as vital for progress in knowledge societies and innovation-driven economies (OECD, 2018).

In their pragmatic approach to reframing and defining creative skill sets with other competencies (as determined by the OECD) there is a vast overview of the definitions related to creative skills provided (Lucas and Venckute, 2020); within their review, Lucas and Venckute (2020) reference Guilford (1950), suggesting the way individuals think are either convergent (i.e., coming up with an idea) or divergent (purveyed as the key to creativity; this is sub-divided into three components, including problem-solving, originality and flexibility) (Lucas and Venckute, 2020). If we focus here on an individuals' capacity to be flexible through creative thinking, we can assume individuals are able to 'simultaneously consider a variety of alternatives' (Lucas and Venckute, 2020, p. 5). One could conjecture the dispositional barriers highlighted by Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) could be a result of adult learners divergent thought patterns, where flexibility towards new ideas may be limited (Guilford, 1950; Lucas and Venckute, 2020). There is also potential scope for understanding what flexibility means in relation to the time commitment required through HTQ and academic pathways.

Providing flexibility and communicating how this can work for an individual relies on IAG being in place to support informed decision-making, and this is where there appears to be a gap in recent literature. As noted earlier, Scott (2010) asserts that the 'blurring of boundaries' in terms of HE progression using the 'vocational ladder' approach will have a distinct impact on providers, whether this is through FE or HE. Bynner (2017) explores what halted the UK's progress in lifelong learning, contextualising the history of lifelong learning as a policy agenda. Bynner (2017) argues that the provision of lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in this critical area of basic skills and capability development merits the highest priority. Bynner (2017) further adds 'the disregard of the skills agenda for the wider

context of learning and the multiple benefits to be obtained from both its inputs and outputs needs to be resisted' (p. 82). As we have noted, linking between educational levels and opportunities can be challenging for many, particularly adults (Connor and Little, 2005; Roberts, 2011). Having a clear set of objectives to support adult IAG and management of expectations around flexibility is pertinent (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020) not only to aid recruitment, but also to support continuation on programmes.

Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) argue that adult learners, often with limited educational experience and confidence, require help and support navigating the further education system, working out what is best for them, and sustaining the belief that they can achieve their goals. Given the LLE's proposal for individual responsibility for training funds worth thousands of pounds, this need provides more impetus for a dynamic IAG system. The UK's approach to supporting adults to plug economic gaps presents barriers specifically to the subgrouping of students as recognised in a report from the Learning and Work Institute, completed on behalf of the Department of Education (Learning and Work Institute, 2019).

The findings from this report detail that participants discussed at least one barrier faced at access stage with the most disadvantaged learners describing the cumulative effect of multiple barriers to learning. These groups included: people in receipt of benefits; people with disabilities and health conditions; single parents' (Learning and Work Institute, 2019: p. 3). These relate to overcoming the barriers to learning, such as cost, childcare, awareness of opportunities and employer support; further echoing the need for practical and circumstantial factors to be in place to facilitate learning.

Personal guidance is a key ingredient in the existing careers strategy (Department of Education, 2017; Hooley, 2021), yet NCS funding requires them to focus on those not in employment, education or training (NEET) (Hargreaves, 1997; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020) as one may expect. However, in doing so, it is questionable whether this strategy potentially ignores the needs of those looking to retrain more holistically. As Hargreaves (1997) notes, targeting only specific groups may restrict these services to the wider population. Accordingly, widespread, accessible and

high-quality advice and mentorship are vital to a well-functioning adult education system (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020) and fulfilling a guarantee to provide a flexible, lifelong system for all UK citizens (Department of Education, 2021a). If policy aims to upskill a wider adult audience across educational levels, there needs to be a focus on confidence and anxiety relating to education.

Davies and Williams (2001) explore the emphasis in public policy on HE as a personal investment and impacts the decision-making process for those considering HE. They find that despite recognising that return of investment is high in terms of personal assessment, mature students are more driven by risks (Davies and Williams, 2001); for example, many of the respondents noted the risks associated with finance, having confidence in their own abilities and balancing study alongside work were too high a risk for their progression (p.189). MillionPlus (2018) also notes the debt adversity as an off-putting factor for mature students, but further comments that mature students will often have specific motivators for returning to education and are 'heavily invested' due to the level of commitment required. MillionPlus (2018) justifies that mature students must consider making 'significant sacrifices' such as putting career progress on hold and restricting their free time (p. 17).

In 2018, a group of adult educators and advocates of lifelong learning created a campaign to celebrate the centenary of lifelong learning following the release of Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee's Final Report (1919); a new committee (made up of experts, celebrities and MPs), called the Centenary Commission was established to replicate the original framework. The campaign argues the case further for adult education agendas to receive more investments and urges for collaboration to provide better lifelong learning opportunities across the UK (Centenary Commission, 2019). Many of the recommendations and key findings from the Centenary Report seem to echo the intentions of the Skills for Jobs White Paper, with exception to the case for regional hubs for IAG strategies to support lifelong learning. To further draw upon this point, the report makes several recommendations to partnerships being established at regional and sub-regional levels, bringing together local and regional governments, HE and FE providers, and businesses to

map out pathways and strategise initiatives (Centenary Commission, 2019: p. 7).

It is worth further considering the training needs for educational providers in providing IAG, as Hooley (2021) notes 'the problem with the Skills for Jobs White Paper is that it falls somewhere between describing a complete education and training system' (p. 4) and thus requires a great deal of knowledge of the pathways and funding mechanisms in place. Hargreaves (1997) points out that a large IAG proportion of practitioners do not hold recognised qualifications in the field, and that finding multi-skilled polymaths to map the of opportunities for individuals without training is rare.

Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones (2022) assert that integrating HE knowledge through vocational Level 3 curriculums can support recruitment to future study opportunities and embed skills to navigate future opportunities. This embedded curriculum approach echoes the WP agenda, providing outreach through collaborative programmes between FE and HE such as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) (Raven, 2021; Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones, 2020) in creating initiatives to widen participation on a regional level. Raven (2021) conveys the importance of providing IAG through collaborative practice to ensure FE providers have support to make HE accessible to those from widening participation backgrounds (p. 82). Considering Hooley's (2021) assertion that personal guidance is vital to support the new policy's intentions against the evidence this article has discussed, we could imply here that the need for training of IAG providers is also key (a point echoed by Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly pertinent in the case of adults, as IAG will need to provide subject-specific information as well as information on how study can be managed alongside work and caring responsibilities as well as how it can be funded (Little and Connor, 2005; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020).

During the last round of APPs (2019-20 to 2024-25) the OfS provided guidance on writing APP documents to HEIs, allowing individual contextualisation of regional challenges and characteristics (OfS regulatory notice 1, 2019). To accompany this guidance, the OfS included topic briefings to further contextualise specific challenges and trends its data has identified



within specific groups. One of the groups' causing concern was highlighted as mature students, with the OfS advising universities to be ambitious in their strategies and policies. However, despite this advice, a later published OfS Insight Brief noted that in the 'APPs submitted to the OfS as of March 2020, only forty out of 230 included targets related to mature students... of these forty institutions, only twenty-seven were from universities' (OfS, 2021). As we move forward to the new APP period and implementation of the LLE in 2025, it will be interesting to see how providers will deliver lifelong learning provision. To successfully ensure FE and HE providers review regional risks against the EORR and support lifelong learning, IAG will need to be easily accessible and include information about courses including associated costs so students can track the use of their LLE (Hillman, 2021). Information should also include availability of funding streams and access to childcare and transport provision (Learning and Work Institute, 2019; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, information about how previous qualifications translate across the educational levels in FE and HE admissions policies is crucial in fulfilling the objectives highlighted by the LLE and HTQ reform (Butcher, 2017).

## Catering to an adult audience

IAG for those outside of compulsory education exist online through a combination of providers, including NCS, UCAS and the National Health Service (NHS) careers pages (for Health disciplines; NHS, 2023). There is an absence of evidence on how adults access information relating to education or training, but one could speculate on whether digital literacy could be a major factor in how individuals look for information (Silamut and Petsangsri, 2020). The Learning and Work Institute<sup>xi</sup> (2019) research explores what works to improve basic adult skills, finding that programmes to enhance basic skills can improve confidence and have a positive impact on a range of outcomes. By increasing the level of confidence with navigating digital technology, The Learning and Work Institute (2019) found that most learners enjoyed learning new self-directed skills to improve maths and reading competencies; however, others preferred more one-on-one personal support and guidance (p. 6).

Bhattacharya *et al.* (2010) propose a large-scale outreach campaign is needed to demonstrate the benefits of adult education with the use of traditional and media communications, but added that there is no substitute for personal contact; essentially outreach initiatives should be taken to the community, rather than expecting learners to seek out information spontaneously (p. 42). Adult learners may research opportunities online, but there is an assumption that individuals will have the self-directed learning skills in the first place to find information relevant to them (Hargreaves, 1997). When reviewing literature relating to challenges in recruiting mature students into tertiary-level education, there is a clear theme surrounding the representation of adult peers (MillionPlus, 2018; Twigg-Flesner, 2018).

Much of the existing evidence leans towards adult students feeling underrepresented and missing vital information required to make informed decisions; it could be proposed that the existing IAG structure may not appeal to sections of the audience without specific guidance (Learning and Work Institute, 2019). Furthermore, the Skills for Jobs White Paper and LLE do not focus on IAG ambitions but instead seemingly aim to layer these recent changes into existing structures (Scott, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). This could support the potential for greater social mobility or create an overwhelming number of opportunities that are difficult to navigate through without guidance.

Further to earlier points raised on carrying the necessary skills to explore lifelong learning opportunities (Hargreaves, 1997; Lucas and Venckute, 2020), one could also consider the importance of IAG carried through an individual's time in education. Incorrect choice of course is a commonly noted factor in students choosing to withdraw from university (Yorke, 1999; Longden and Yorke, 2008; Thomas, 2012; van Rhijn *et al.*, 2015; Hillman, 2021). Thomas (2002) indicated that reasons students leave include academic preparedness; academic experience; institutional expectations; employment; family support and commitments; and the significance of financial issues (Thomas, 2002). The latter point here is poignant as the 2022 'cost of living' crisis has layered in additional financial concerns, with

mature and commuting students among the most affected (MillionPlus, 2022).

Reay, Ball and David (2013) accuse the marketisation of HE following the Dearing report (Education England, 1997) of being the leading cause of the decline of adults participating in tertiary-level education. Funding is a considerable barrier to adult education participation; however, meeting entry requirements for admissions standards is another challenge faced by mature students (Butcher, 2017). HEI entry requirements often require a mixture of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications and place an emphasis on A-levels, which can leave adults feeling alienated, confused, and as if they do not belong (Twigg-Flesner, 2018). The introduction of EORR reflects ten risks for mature students, which include supporting information and guidance, flexible course delivery, academic and student level support, as well as information on funding (OfS, 2023b). However, the EORR and APP guidance provided by OfS (2023a) is separate from the Skills for Jobs White Paper (Department of Education, 2021a) and the introduction of the LLE (Department of Education, 2023c) despite being affected by them. HEIs targeting mature students through their APP may be in direct competition with FE providers as much as before (Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones, 2020; Raven, 2021), but now they will need to further consider how HTQs will impact their standards of entry and how these can translate for those outside of compulsory education.

Butcher (2017) is an advocate of considering those with a portfolio of non-traditional qualifications, focusing on the positive and diverse range of benefits adults can bring to study. Information relating to how a course is structured and managed for an individual is imperative to see the benefits and weigh up whether it is manageable alongside daily life (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). Reay, Ball and David (2013) argue that the challenges of accessing and transitioning into HE for mature students are a consequence of class. Individuals may be limited in choice based on regionality and personal sets of circumstances and how choice is navigated based on experience and accessibility (Reay, Davies, David and Ball, 2001).

Tertiary education needs to cater to adult audiences as well as younger audiences. As Butcher (2017) outlines, Outreach

initiatives defined through an APP should be inclusive of adult learners and consider the range of diverse needs that IAG should offer. Supporting individuals in exploring opportunities and improving their knowledge and confidence is a principal factor in IAG (Butcher, 2017: p. 15). Twigg-Flesner (2018) discusses the representation and identity of mature students within HE and how to foster a sense of belonging to support the retention of those who choose to complete a degree. Interventions need to be tailored to ensure adults feel included and can make informed decisions relating to their own needs. As already noted, key reasons for non-continuation at tertiary-level for adult students include a lack of support and difficulties relating to finance and funding (McGivney, 1996; Longden and Yorke, 2008; van Rhijn, 2015).

To improve retention, tertiary-level education providers will need to ensure their IAG relating to courses and funding is clear (Hillman, 2021). Furthermore, the implications for LLE entitlement will need to be considered, as non-continuation may affect the amount of funding remaining available to an individual (WonkHE, 2023a). Historically, students who have completed tertiary-level study have been unable to access student finances to advance or change disciplines (MillionPlus, 2018). The LLE promises to allow individuals to top up, retrain and study flexibly, but without a framework to support those delivering IAG, there is a clear need for a system like the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP) to promote the regional collaboration of businesses, education and funding bodies (Centenary Commission, 2019; Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones, 2020; Hooley, 2021).

## Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration: recommendations for a consistent approach

We have explored the clear need for IAG in conjunction with the Skills for Jobs White Paper and subsequent LLE in delivering intended outcomes. The recommendations below are themed on tailoring information about routes into study, associated funding and support in building confidence for adult students.

- A clear IAG strategy for those outside of compulsory education, including guidance on funding and access to childcare. For tertiary-level specifically, HEIs interested in

supporting the adult education agenda would benefit from collaborating closely with local councils, FE and training providers to map out opportunities regionally (Centenary, Commission, 2019). This will involve reviewing labour market information, economic needs and where gaps may exist, creating a central hub of support. This suggestion very much reflects the ethos of Butcher (2017), MillionPlus (2018), and Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) in promoting an egalitarian approach to adult education and echoes points raised in the Centenary Report (2019). A central regional hub may provide a single point of truth in providing IAG to support adults to make informed decisions about the routes into education or training that best support lifelong learning. Notable examples exist already, such as:

~ The Leeds Lifelong Learning Centre offers specialist advice and flexible study provision across a range of educational levels and sectors (University of Leeds, 2023). Lifelong Learning Centres address the specific needs of adults by providing IAG and provide a range of work-based or classroom-based opportunities through flexible delivery and inclusive practise (Bynner, 2017; Lucas and Venckute, 2020).

~ LifePilot is an online IAG tool providing information to help adults progress into higher level study. The website not only provides a range of helpful information to support informed decision-making, but there are also direct links to local providers, including FE and HE and other training opportunities. Users can view information from a collaboration of universities and education providers based in the south-west of England, filtering based on work or degree-level opportunities (LifePilot, 2023). This intervention also links through to the NCS careers guidance and reflects the NCOP approaches outlined by Butcher (2017) and Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones (2022), providing a collaborative way of supporting adults through interventions tailored to their needs.

- Tertiary-level providers should consider providing representation of HTQs within course information and admissions policies, clearly detailing expectations and how

prior recognition of work experience may be considered (Butcher, 2017; Baldwin, Raven and Weber-Jones, 2022). It would also be advantageous to detail information relating to hours of teaching per week or providing access to timetables so students can align to their existing commitments (MillionPlus, 2018). Furthermore, details of course costs, including fees, should be reviewed ahead of the LLE to ensure prospective students can work out the course costs in line with their entitlement (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020; Hillman, 2021).

- Design a framework and training opportunities for those advising on IAG, including opportunities for continued professional development (CIFE, 2021). Coulson (2021) urges the government to trust the CDI's recommendations in relation to the Skills for Jobs White Paper to support longevity in work satisfaction. The link between employers and education providers is key to the success of the intended policy changes and supporting the growth of industry. The role of Outreach here is pivotal in providing guidance to individuals and supporting adults in building their soft skills and confidence (Butcher, 2017: Learning and Work Institute, 2019).

- Ensuring the representation of adult learners through initiatives will help to challenge the assumption that these schemes are exclusively aimed at young people. Historically, work-based initiatives, such as apprenticeships, have been aimed at younger audiences and as such, sections of the adult community may be unaware of opportunities available (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2020). To attract a wider spectrum of those looking for progression or change, a robust marketing strategy will need to develop alongside an IAG framework (Hooley, 2021). IAG should also extend to mature students throughout their time in education to support continuation and ensure good outcomes and use of LLE entitlement (Hillman, 2021).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the implications that the introduction of the Skills for Jobs White Paper and subsequent LLE

may have on both adult learners and both FE and HE providers. Thematically, we have found through the reviewed literature that the absence of an IAG plan has caused considerable concern within the sector as well as raised questions relating to future government plans to address these. The Lifelong Learning agenda has been a grey area in policy for the past two decades, which has in part contributed to the decline in participation, not only through FE and HE but also through work-based training schemes (Bynner, 2017). As Bhattacharya *et al.* (2020) state 'one plausible contributor to the relative neglect of adult education in recent years is a lack of clarity over responsibility and accountability for its success' (p. 43). Through a more regionally collaborative approach, local governments can steer providers to create a centrally layered support system for employers, education providers and the local population they support. To cease the downward trend and use what positive outputs may come from the Skills for Jobs White Paper and LLE will depend heavily on what the government chooses to do next through policy and the allocation of funding.

We have identified that there is further scope for research into how adults navigate tertiary education options relating to future employment opportunities and career changes. This includes where and how adults access information and make decisions, and whether they feel the opportunities on offer appeal to them. Providing modularity to cater to such a large heterogenous group will undoubtedly prove challenging. Through better defining what is meant by flexibility and committing to a standard or IAG framework we can begin to understand what works in relation to lifelong learning strategies.

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<sup>i</sup> The Skills for Jobs White Paper was delayed due to COVID-19 following the release of the independent post-18 review of education and funding, completed by Augar in 2019 (Department of Education, 2019).

<sup>ii</sup> A summary of the Skills for Jobs White Paper is included to provide context to the wide breadth of ambition set out in this policy. This document sets out the government's intentions, but as it is a 'White Paper', it does not constitute new law or regulation.

<sup>iii</sup> Policy reforms in the UK go through a specific process in Parliament prior to commencement. For further information on the parliamentary process, see HM Government's 'guide to making legislation', 2022.

<sup>iv</sup> Definitions of adult education can vary depending on literature. For the purposes of this article, it refers to those aged over 18 who are outside of compulsory education.

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<sup>v</sup> Vocational ladder approaches can be described as the progression from one level of education to another. E.g., Level 1 to 2 and so on (Little and Connor, 2005).

<sup>vi</sup> The definition for mature students referenced within this article is a student aged over 21 years when entering HE (OfS, 2020).

<sup>vii</sup> The Chartered Institute for Further Education (CIFE) is a professional body offering membership to institutions offering further education in the UK. CIFE also works with industry to shape skills provision and support economy growth (CIFE, 2023).

<sup>viii</sup> The National Careers Service (NCS) offers careers advice to people aged 13+ with lifelong careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) to support informed decision making (NCS, 2023b).

<sup>ix</sup> University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for higher education (UCAS, 2023b).

<sup>x</sup> The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfAte) is an employer led organisation supporting technical education and apprenticeships in the UK. IfAte work with employers to develop, approve, review and revise apprenticeships and technical qualifications, with board members appointed by the Secretary of State for Education (IfAte, 2023b).

<sup>xi</sup> The Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, employment and inclusion. Their research aims to influence policy, furthering discussions relating to adult education and the implementation of new approaches (Learning and Work Institute, 2023).



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